

JAMES BURNHAM

## The Protracted Conflict

### WHICH ARE THE TRUE PAPERS?

It's not always that easy to tell the fake from the genuine article. For instance:

"The Complete and Unabridged Series" of *The Pentagon Papers* "as published by *The New York Times*" is labeled on the jacket, "The Secret History of the Vietnam War," and has been so headlined, promoted and moralized over. Let us examine what has actually been put before us.

In June 1967 Defense Secretary Robert McNamara, who had by then become discouraged with the Vietnam war, ordered a secret study to be made of U.S. involvement in Indochina since the end of World War II. The project was carried out, it is said, by 36 persons assembled from the Pentagon, the State Department and one or two of the semi-official think tanks. Only two of the three dozen have been named: Leslie Gelb, who was in charge of the project, and Daniel Ellsberg, who slipped part of its product to the press in order to atone for his war crimes and crimes against humanity.

The 36 were as busy as beavers for eighteen months following their assignment. They collected four thousand pages of documents, wrote three thousand pages of narrative and commentary—more than two and a half million words in all—and churned these into 47 volumes.

But before skipping to the next step in the evolution of the Pentagon Papers, we should note: 1) The collected documents, though multitudinous, were a narrow selection from the entirety of those bearing on the assigned topic. None came from the White House, none from the National Security Council and few from the State Department or CIA. 2) The investigations by the 36 did not include any direct testimony from any of the leading participants in the events, who, it may be presumed, said things to each other that were not written down and who made the decisions. 3) Some at least of the 36 scribes—beginning with the surfaced Ellsberg and Gelb, who are sufficiently on public record—were in no sense neutral or disinterested chroniclers. They were out to present not an objective chronicle, but a *Philippine*, a *J'accuse!*, an indictment of the nation

and its leadership and their intent is plainly mirrored in the emotion-laden bias of their prose. "Our" share in Diem's overthrow is "complicity"; our tactics not merely fail, but fail "disastrously"; a meeting of the NSC becomes "revealing" because of its "rambling inability to focus"; our planning takes on "a kind of absurd quality." Hardly the tone of an objective historian, scholar or bureaucrat. So it is not surprising to come upon such revealing (if I may borrow the word) sentences as the following. One of Mr. McNamara's anonymous narrators states that in 1945-1946 Ho Chi Minh wrote eight letters to President Truman and Secretary Acheson appealing for United States support and intervention "against French colonialism," but apparently got no reply. The narrator comments: "Non-intervention by the United States on behalf of the Vietnamese was tantamount to acceptance of the French." (My italics.) Read back: it was *Ho Chi Minh* who wrote the letters. (Still my italics.)

So now Secretary McNamara's modest project goes through its next selective screening process. Ellsberg, throbbing with his own guilt, decides all the rest of us must feel guilty along with him, so he (and who else?) turns his loot over to the papers (in another Top Secret transaction, naturally). But not all of it, no sir. Ellsberg and Co. stash three or four of those 47 volumes back in the hideout. Seems a fellow can't trust even the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* these days. And, well, who knows when a few very special Top Secrets might come in handy.

Then the *Times* gets its selective screening process under way. Three months later the 2.5 million words are down to about a quarter million. To make sure they arrange themselves in

the proper pattern, an outline is blocked in by the *Times* staff, and reinforced by the penetration of headlines, editorials and columns of the media at large. This surrounding fog obscures from all but the most alert readers the fact that the juicier documents—including those on which accusations of "deliberate deception" are to be based—were actually mere "contingency planning" or analyses of "options."

Let us mention, finally, that not one citizen in a million will read more than a few of the documents included in even this 10 per cent version, and most people won't read any of them. The public impression will be derived from the headlines, news stories, TV and columns, most of which added still another stage of selective screening, distortion and downright falsification.

Is *The Pentagon Papers* in truth, then, "the history of the Vietnam war"? Although many of its elements are of historical significance, the account of its evolution proves that the whole is not a history in any legitimate sense, nor the condensation or summary of a history. The jacket label, "The Secret History of the Vietnam war," is a falsification; *The Pentagon Papers*, that is to say, is a fake, like one of those paintings by Elmyr Jo Hory signed Picasso or Matisse.

NR launched its little fiction two weeks ago to prick the pretentious and distorting bubble the media had blown around that fake. "The poet's function"—we will take it from Aristotle—"is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen, i.e., what is possible as being probable or necessary . . . One must not aim at a rigid adherence to the traditional stories. . . . It would be absurd, in fact, to do so, as even the known stories are only known to a few. . . . And if the poet should come to take a subject from actual history, he is none the less a poet for that, since some historical occurrences may very well be in the possible and probable order of things. . . . Hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history since its statements are of the nature rather of universals." □

